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ABSTRACT

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is a systematic intervention which enables individuals to recognize, articulate, communicate, and use their Dependable Strengths. Dependable Strengths are those personal strengths that are clearly established and owned by the individual. They can earn the Dependable Strengths designation by satisfying these criteria: (1) they have been used in at least three different Good Experiences; (2) they can usually be traced back to childhood; and (3) the owner wants to use them in future activities. Good Experiences occur when one feels one has done something well, enjoyed doing it, and takes some pride in it. The DSAP model can be used to focus on the effects of the weight given the person's meaningful constructs. If the weighting factor is stressed, then methods designed to change self-esteem would seek to increase the weighting of those constructs known to be related to the person's Dependable Strengths. The intended outcomes of the DSAP include a revised self-identity and increased self-esteem. Assumptions underlying the DSAP include the following: individuals and modern society are complex; a person's self-identity depends upon the particular qualities attended to by the person when the individual is aware of the self; and if the person rates highly on valued qualities the person will have high self-esteem and continue to seek growth and mastery. (ABL)

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Rationale of the Dependable Strengths Articulation Process

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RATIONALE OF THE DEPENDABLE STRENGTHS ARTICULATION PROCESS

PART I: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

Introduction:

The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process (DSAP) is a systematic intervention which enables individuals to recognize, articulate, communicate and use their Dependable Strengths. The DSAP is based on the professional experiences of Bernard Haldane (Haldane,1988; Haldane, Haldane & Martin, 1984), who developed a number of approaches for facilitating the career development of adults. Several of Haldane's approaches have been adapted and popularized in the best-selling book, What Color Is Your Parachute (Bolles, 1989). The development of the DSAP was also influenced by concepts and practices formulated by Forster (1985) to facilitate the articulation of personal goals.

The model which is presented in this paper was developed to explain how the DSAP influences a person's self-esteem. The model uses concepts from cognitive processing theories and Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955).

Key Concepts:

A Personal Construct is an organizer of stimuli. It resides in the mind of an individual and is activated by certain stimuli or events. These stimuli may be occurring in the individual's immediate outer environment or as part of the inner environment, made up of memories and images of the future. Meaning is evoked by the stimuli (or events) as part of a cognitive process that relates these stimuli to previous instances. As a person stores up experiences, these experiences must be organized and stored in a way that allows them to be recalled and related. It is theorized that new experiences are compared with stored experiences by means of personal constructs, allowing the person to relate the present with the past and to anticipate what may happen in similar future situations.

The Personal Construct was the primary unit of Kelly's Personal Construct Theory (1955). The Personal Construct unit will also be used as the primary unit of the conceptual model being proposed in this paper, although its definition and usage will only approximate Kelly's precise theorizing . While the general concept of the Personal Construct remains a useful one for model building, studies of concept formation, categorization and the use of schemata offer elaborations on the understanding of how personal constructs work. For example, the following descriptions of schemata, the basic units used by information-processing theorists, provide overlapping and elaborating insights into personal constructs:

> .....implicit real-world knowledge enables perceivers to detect features of their surroundings and higher-order stimulus structure to which they would otherwise be insensitive. The term schemata is used in reference to this crucially important collection of structured knowledge. Schemata are the

> central cognitive units in the human information-processing system (Neisser,1976; Rumelhart & Norman, 1978). We view schemata as memory structures of conceptually related elements that guide the processing of information. They are conceptual frameworks for representing relationships among stimuli that are built up on the basis of experience with reality. They are active in the categorization, interpretation, and comprehension of social events and behavior.(p.43)
>
> Markus and Sentis (1982)

Core constructs are the person's most meaningful personal constructs. They are the personal constructs that are related to self-identity, thereby sensitizing him or her to stimuli that are likely to be used for self-evaluation.

Personal strengths are self-identified positive characteristics or qualities of a person. These personal strengths are recognized by means of personal constructs which allow the person to see patterns in his or her own behaviors that contribute to positive outcomes.

Dependable strengths are those personal strengths that are clearly established and owned by the individual. They can be identified by exploring Good Experiences. They can earn the Dependable Strengths designation, by satisfying the following criteria:

(a) they have been used in at least three different Good Experiences,
(b) they can usually be traced back to childhood, and
(c) the owner wants to use them in future activities.

Good Experiences are events when:

(a) you feel you did something well,
(b) you enjoyed doing it, and
(c) you have some pride in it.

Elaborations on the Model:

Since the foregoing concepts and processes are both abstract and complex, a simpler metaphor, that of a magnifying lens, will be used to demonstrate the operation of a personal construct. A lens may allow the eye to see an object that would not have been noticed without this assistance. A personal construct might also permit a person to notice some particular aspect of events as they are taking place. It is likely that those aspects would not have been recognized and related to past events without the benefit of the construct. Therefore, an event may take on a special meaning because the personal construct helps the observer see some special aspect of the event.

It should be kept in mind that the lens operates on a simpler principle than the personal construct. The lens helps the observer see something that is physically in evidence, while the personal construct evokes meanings that go far beyond the physical reality of the stimuli. The meanings reside in the mind

of the person. The personal construct is a particular idea or concept that has been activated to make more sense out of a given event. Like the lens, the personal construct enables the person to be aware of something, which may be, in the case of the construct, simply an idea or an abstract theme.

A lens could be used to obtain a better view of any type of object, including one's self-image, if a mirror were also used. In like manner, personal constructs can be used to focus attention on one's self. The construction and reconstruction of self-identity using personal constructs will be explored in the following sections of this paper.

An Example:

To help us in this exploration, consider a fictional person named John, a 45 year old high school teacher who has three children, an ex-wife, and a variety of hobbies and interests. Some of the personal constructs that he used to describe himself are listed below:

I am:

1. a father
2. a social studies teacher in a high school
3. a son
4. divorced
5. slightly overweight
6. a witty story-teller
7. a natural athlete (but I am now limited in how I practice this)
8. a recovering alcoholic
9. middle-aged

Just as John could use a magnifying lens to see previously hidden aspects of himself, he can use personal constructs to recognize certain aspects of himself he otherwise would have missed. However, it is important to recognize that the meaning generated by use of these personal constructs was, at least partly, constructed only by John. We cannot assume that others would identify him as a witty story-teller or as being slightly overweight.

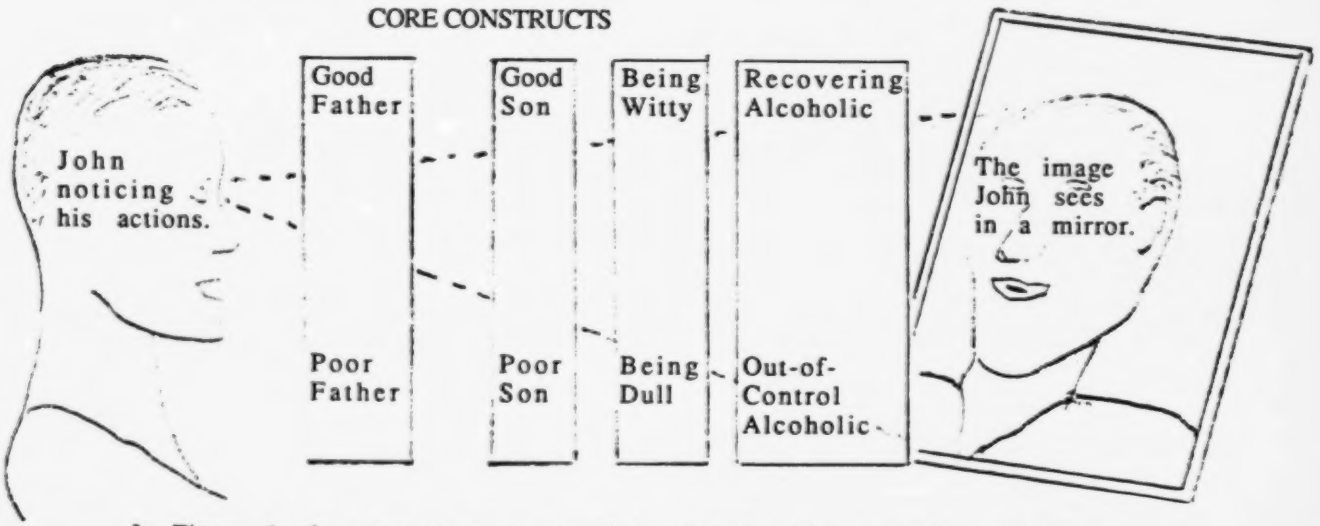
The model that is being presented to explain how self-identity is formed and changed emphasizes that certain personal constructs are more important than others in determining self-identity and self-esteem. The constructs that are the most important ones are called core constructs. The core constructs are the ones that are used by the person when evaluating how she or he is doing at any particular time. If John valued his role as a father and as a teacher the most, he would be particulary sensitive to feedback or other evidence about his functioning in these two roles. His self-esteem could be seriously affected by news that his teenaged son has run away and rejected his family, or that students were avoiding his classes during registration for the next semester. He may be less affected by a letter from his mother reminding him that he had forgotten his father's birthday again.

The influence of new information related to John's core constructs will also be tempered by the backlog of processed memories that relate to those particular constructs. If John had established in his own mind a solid pattern of

"good son" behavior during his earlier years, he may trivialize the lapse of memory about his father's birthday. On the other hand, if he already had doubts about his adequacy as a son, his mother's letter might stimulate a real drop in his self-esteem. Since current self-esteem is influenced by new information combined with memories of past events, the relative influence of each source will depend on the stability and quantity of previously-processed information. Individuals with fragile self-identities will be more influenced by current events, while those with more solid self-identities will be less sensitive to stimuli from current events.

To elaborate on this model of cognitive processing, consider the possibility that John has several core constructs and that some are more important to him than others. Current events and memories of previous events provide a constant stream of stimuli to his processing system and these stimuli activate personal meanings as they are viewed through his core constructs. Figure 1 illustrates this process.

FIGURE 1: A graphic depiction of John using four lens-like core constructs to look at himself.



In Figure 1, the core constructs could be thought of as a series of lenses, each with a different weighting factor. The implications of stimuli that activated the Good Father meaning might have twice the weight as stimuli that activated the Being Witty construct. If by chance the stimuli activated the Out-of-Control end of his Alcoholic construct, the negative effect might be weighted even more heavily, thereby subtracting from the cumulative meanings activated at any one time. The sum of the cumulative meanings could be thought of as a measure of the person's self-esteem.

This model provides a means for describing how an intervention might influence a person's self-esteem. We might begin by recognizing the

importance of the nature of a particular core construct that has evolved in the person. Whereas John might have weighted heavily his own witty behavior, someone else might have valued a completely different type of behavior, such as supportive or caring behavior. This model suggests that a person's self-esteem is dependent on the particular constructs that have become core constructs and how the person typically sees him/her self with respect to those constructs. Changes in self-esteem can be facilitated by helping the person behave in ways that correspond to the positive end of his or her core constructs. Another way of changing self-esteem is to help the person add new core constructs that are known to be related to the person's self-assessed Dependable Strengths.

The model can be used to focus on the effects of the weight given the person's meaningful constructs. The core designation simply indicates that particular constructs have a heavy weighting when used to process stimuli, while others do not. If the weighting factor is stressed, then methods designed to change self-esteem would seek to increase the weighting of those constructs known to be related to the person's Dependable Strengths. That is essentially what the DSAP attempts to do.

How the DSAP increases self-esteem:

1. The DSAP helps the participant articulate several personal constructs, elicited by talking about Good Experiences.

2. The constructs elicited using Good Experiences are likely to focus the participant's attention on personal strengths, some of which may earn the title of Dependable Strengths.

3. The process of determining if the elicited personal strengths shall earn the title of Dependable Strengths helps the participant identify and acknowledge constructs that may be core constructs.

4. The reality test for verifying that the identified strengths really can be called Dependable Strengths, encourages the participant to acknowledge the importance of these constructs. Such an acknowlegement increases the likelihood that these particular constructs will become core constructs, if they were not previously considered to be that important.

5. During various steps of the DSAP, the person is encouraged to participate in a support group which cooperates in a process wherein each group member receives and gives support for articulating and using Dependable Strengths.

6. The focusing of attention on one's most positive qualities increases the person's general self-esteem and enables the person to select new activities with greater confidence and a better chance of succeeding.

A more elaborate description of the DSAP procedures can be found in the paper titled "The Dependable Strengths Articulation Process: How It Works" (Haldane, 1989). A short form version, the DSAP-S (Haldane & Forster, 1988) can also be obtained from THE DEPENDABLE STRENGTHS PROJECT, 402 MILLER HALL, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SEATTLE, WASHINGTON 98195.

Intended Outcomes of the Intervention:

The DSAP was designed to facilitate a good deal of self-exploration and the articulation of those personal constructs that can be used to describe ones own Dependable Strengths. A participant in the DSAP should be able to describe "who I am" in a more organized way that emphasizes his or her Dependable Strengths. For example, John, the fictional person discussed in earlier parts of this paper, would be expected to describe himself in a different way after engaging in the DSAP. Examples of possible changes in John's self-description are shown in Figure 2.

The intended outcomes of the DSAP include a revised self-identity and increased self-esteem. This increased self-esteem would be expected to be demonstrated when participants describe themselves on instruments such as The Adjective CheckList (ACL) Results of DSAP interventions carried out during the first year of the Dependable Strengths Project are reported by McMurrer (1989).

Figure 2: Examples John's Core Constructs before and after an Intervention with the Dependable Strengths Articulation

Before Intervention	After Intervention
1. a father	1. an effective motivator of young people
2. a h.s. social studies teacher	2. a leader
3. a son	3. an inspirational coach
4. divorced	4. having high energy
5. a witty story-teller	5. a witty story-teller
6. somewhat overweight	6. a caring father
7. a recovering alcoholic	7. a natural athlete
8. a natural athlete	8. a dependable son
9. middle-aged	

PART II: ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE DSAP

Any conceptual model operates with certain assumptions. Some of the assumptions underlying the DSAP intervention are listed below:

1. Individuals are complex and unique because of the wide range of possible qualities and the many ways these different qualities can interact with other qualities.

2. The modern society is also complex and offers a wide variety of environments which support diverse types of people. In other words, people can vary widely and still be successful in a complex society.

3. Individuals who are different from each other can thrive in a common environment where diversity is acknowledged and cooperation is fostered. In these environments, individuals can concentrate on using their strengths and supporting others who will be using their own strengths consisting of different skills and qualities

4. A person's self-identity depends upon the particular qualities attended to by the person when the individual is aware of his/her self. These qualities are attended to by means of the individual's personal constructs.

5. The qualities that are valued the most become those used by the person to evaluate self. A person's self-esteem is related to how positively the person evaluates self on these most valued qualities.

6. If a person rates self poorly on valued qualities, that person will have low self-esteem and will strive to change with respect to those qualities. However, if the person makes little progress in changing, that person may change the qualities that are valued, or come to accept self as a person who is failing or at least doing poorly. If this sense of failure is accepted and becomes the person's primary self-identity, the person is likely to act in ways that are self-destructive, counterproductive or antisocial.

7. If the person rates self highly on valued qualities, that person will have high self-esteem and continue to seek growth and mastery in known and new areas. A person with high self-esteem has energy for extra efforts and therefore seeks challenge and self-improvement.

PART III: SUPPORTIVE LITERATURE

The psychological and educational literature supporting interventions such as the DSAP is extensive. A sample of the literature has been selected to support the conceptual model, the assumptions and the basic rationale of the DSAP. That sample is reported below:

Taylor and Brown (1988) provide an extensive review of studies which support interventions designed to increase positive perceptions of the self. Their article, titled "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health", builds a solid case for the development and maintenance of an individual's positive illusions. They point out that ....."A great deal of research in social, personality, clinical, and developmental psychology documents that normal individuals possess unrealistically positive views of themselves, an exaggerated belief in their ability to control their environment, and a view of the future that maintains that their future will be far better than the average person's. Furthermore, individuals who are moderately depressed or low in self-esteem consistently display an absence of such enhancing illusions." (p.197). This evidence suggests that interventions which increase a person's positive self-perceptions will improve that person's mental health, as

shown by greater contentment, caring for and about others, and the capacity for creative, productive work.

Isen's (1987) studies of positive affect, cognitive processes, and social behavior provide another source of support for interventions which increase a person's positive affect. DSAP interventions have been shown to increase positive self-descriptions. It can be inferred that the positive affect of the person was increased along with his or her positive self-descriptions. Isen provides an extensive description of beneficial cognitive and behavioral outcomes that accompany increases in a person's positive affect. Isen's research demonstrates the importance of positiveness as an influence on a person's functioning and therefore supports the use of interventions which enhance positive affect.

Harter's (1986) studies also support the use of an intervention such as the DSAP. She identifies five self-domains that have been found to be relevant in preadolescent and adolescent learners: scholastic competence, athletic competence, social competence, social acceptance, physical appearance, and behavior/conduct. Harter found that high self-worth students have a self-serving bias and slightly exaggerate their sense of adequacy, while low self-worth students judge themselves quite harshly. The high self-worth students took more responsibility for their successes than for their failures, but the low self-worth students did not.

McComes (1986) reviewed several studies on the role of the self-system in self-regulated learning. Included in her review of relevant literature was coverage of Tesser and Campbell's (1982) self-evaluation maintenance model which posits that individuals are basically motivated to maintain a positive self-evaluation. McComes reports that ".....Tesser and Campbell found that people with high self-esteem maintain positive evaluations of themselves primarily through cognitive perceptual behavior such as perceiving the world in a self-serving way. On the other hand, people with low self-esteem were found to rely more on behavioral strategies (e.g., negative feedback) in their self-evaluations, with the effect that their evaluations were more accurate but not more adaptive."(p.319)

Further support for focusing on positive self-attributes and personal strengths can be found in the work of Schwartz (1986) who shows that dysfunctional groups have a higher proportion of negative coping thoughts than do functional groups. Schwartz reports several studies showing that functional groups are characterized by approximately a 1.7 to 1 ratio of positive to negative coping thoughts, compared to a 1 to 1 ratio demonstrated by dysfunctional groups.

The sample of studies mentioned above support interventions that increase a person's attention to positive self-perceptions. The resulting benefits include improved mental health, more effective cognitive functioning and enhanced coping behaviors.

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